



Enhancing Labour Opportunities for Ukrainian Women in Rural Nordic Communities

Case studies from Nordic regions

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Preface

This publication is the outcome of a comparative study focusing on Ukrainian refugee women's access to the Nordic labour market in remote regions. The study is funded by the Nordic Gender Equality Fund, which supports projects aimed at knowledge sharing and problem solving with regards to gender equality across the Nordic countries. The research was carried out by the University of Akureyri Research Centre, Högskolan Dalarna and Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences/INN.

The aim of the project is to explore how Ukrainian women who have fled to the Nordic countries since Russia's invasion in 2022 have integrated in the labour market in three remote regions in the Nordic countries: Akureyri (and nearby towns) in Iceland, Dalarna in Sweden and Lillehammer in Norway. The objective is to identify enablers and obstacles to labour market integration for this particular group. Furthermore, the project aims to suggest measures to support their labour market integration to create equal opportunities in the labour market. The project additionally gathers examples of good practice in labour market integration. The results can be applied to inform policy to help improve the integration of Ukrainian women and wider migrant/refugee groups.

The interviews for the case studies were carried out between October 2024 and May 2025. The findings of the interviews were subsequently analysed, and further research material was gathered, including academic articles, news stories and policy information. The researchers would like to note that the area of research is highly dynamic, and both the labour market and support for refugees are therefore subject to change.

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Main results

Ukrainian refugee women generally enter remote Nordic labour markets quickly, but mainly through low skilled jobs, despite often holding high levels of education.

A significant occupational mismatch is observed in all three countries: the vast majority of the women interviewed in Norway and Sweden were not employed in positions matching their qualifications. None of the women interviewed in Iceland were employed in positions matching their qualifications.

The women demonstrate strong motivation, independence, and a desire to become self-sufficient soon after arriving.

Language barriers are the single most significant obstacle to labour market integration.

Recognition of qualifications is challenging across countries, especially in regulated professions (e.g., healthcare, psychology, education).

Lack of local social networks limits access to job opportunities, especially in smaller

or remote communities where informal recruitment is common.

Women frequently depend on pragmatic strategies, accepting any available job as an entry point, and viewing these early roles as stepping stones toward future opportunities.

Despite challenges, many women report high quality of life, appreciation of safety, and intentions to stay long term—although uncertainty about temporary protection status creates stress.

Civil society actors (especially in Sweden) and municipal learning centres (especially in Norway) are key to overcoming gaps left by formal state institutions.

Structured internships and subsidised placements are among the most effective enablers of labour market entry.

High motivation and adaptability suggest strong potential for upward mobility if structural barriers are reduced.

1. Introduction

Ukrainian refugees have fled to the Nordic countries in large numbers following Russia's invasion in February 2022. Since then, they have been the largest group seeking asylum in Iceland, and among the largest groups in Norway and Sweden (Andrésdóttir, 2026; Statistiska Centralbyrån [SCB], 2026; Strøm, 2023).

They comprise mainly of women, without a partner, and many come with children and are thereby the main provider for their family (OECD, 2023). This group is in many ways unique and benefits from some favourable policies (OECD, 2023).

In comparison with other large refugee groups, Ukrainian refugees have certain characteristics that may facilitate their integration (e.g. existing social networks, educational profile and certain goodwill as a group, but others that may hinder them such as being single mothers with children (OECD, 2022). Refugees furthermore experience specific labour market integration challenges, compared with migrants (OECD, 2022). In Norway, for instance, female immigrants are reported to have lower labour force participation, in comparison with the rest of the population, and female refugees have an even lower employment rate than female immigrants (Umblis, 2020).

Previous research has highlighted that refugee women may face a “triple disadvantage” as challenges related to forced migration, immigration status, and gender are combined and reinforce each other, particularly with regards to socio-economic integration (OECD, 2023).

Ukrainian refugees in the Nordic countries have faced some hurdles in entering the labour market. In Iceland they initially needed to apply for work permits, although this changed in March 2023 (Vinnumálastofnun, 2023). Research funded by NIKK (Sigurjónsdóttir et al., 2018) has noted that job mismatch seems to be a common feature for immigrants, including in remote areas. In Norway, Ukrainian refugees need to register to have a right to work.¹ In Sweden, Ukrainians refugees under the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) were initially not eligible for SFI (Swedish for foreigners), as other categories of newly arrived migrants. Instead, other solutions, for example in the form of assistance from civil society actors, were

¹ In Norway they are given “collective protection” if they register themselves to the police and are given “collective protection” status by the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration, they have the right to work.

required. This changed in June 2023, when municipalities were allowed to offer SFI courses for adults. Additionally, many Ukrainians only intend to stay for the short term in the Nordic countries, which can affect their integration. In light of all this, it is important to understand how Ukrainian refugee women are faring in the Nordic labour market.

This new research can be of value in the Nordic context as it is important to support the labour market integration of the this large refugee group to support the Nordic Council of Ministers' goal of well-functioning labour markets, and efforts to strengthen people's connection with the labour market as highlighted in objective 7 for Vision 2030 (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2020). Understanding how refugee women enter labour markets in smaller and remote Nordic regions is particularly important, as these regions often face labour shortages while at the same time experiencing challenges related to demographic change and population decline.

Furthermore, it will be useful to compare results in these three countries as although the European Union (EU) labour force survey has demonstrated that employed foreign citizens are more likely to be over-qualified for their jobs than nationals in all three countries, foreign women are much more likely to be overqualified for their jobs in Norway and Iceland, compared with Sweden (Eurostat, 2026). As there is a focus on rural areas the project will also support objective 9 of Vision 2030 to strengthen social inclusion, belonging and well-being among people in vulnerable positions and their children, by creating conditions for refugees for participating in society and maintaining employment.

This study will first present the findings from the research conducted in and around Akureyri, Iceland. It will then go on to explore the findings from Dalarna in Sweden and Lillehammer in Norway. The report focuses on identifying the main barriers and enabling factors affecting labour market participation in remote labour markets. By comparing experiences across the three regions, the study aims to highlight common challenges as well as differences in institutional responses and support structures. The findings provide insights that may inform policies aimed at improving labour market integration for refugee women in Nordic regions.

2. Icelandic Case Study

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2.1. Icelandic Background

Iceland has proportionally experienced the largest inflow of immigrants of any OECD country in the last ten years. Whilst the vast majority has consisted of immigrants from EU and EFTA countries (four out of five immigrants) the proportion of asylum seekers has also increased (OECD, 2024b).

Employment rates in Iceland are the highest of OECD countries for men as well as women. Nevertheless, research shows that immigrants have a high level of formal overqualification (OECD, 2024b). OECD (2024b) has noted that the lack of Icelandic skills among immigrants in Iceland is a particular challenge, impacting integration. Lack of Icelandic skills can have a detrimental effect on the integration of immigrants into society. Refugees furthermore experience specific labour market integration challenges, compared with migrants (OECD, 2022).

Research funded by NIKK (Sigurjónsdóttir et al., 2018) has noted that job mismatch seems to be a common feature for immigrants, including in remote areas. It has been indicated that increased equality between men and women is mostly observed among women of higher status. Women of foreign origin are highly active in the Icelandic labour market, nevertheless, their position is more vulnerable than that of native women. They often work in physically demanding jobs and are more likely to engage in shift work.

Furthermore, research has demonstrated that women of foreign origin are more likely to face challenges when trying to have their education acknowledged (Ragnarsdóttir et al., 2024). Previous research from the University of Akureyri demonstrated that many immigrant women in Iceland occupy positions that do not fit their education level (at a higher level than native women) (Burdikova et al., 2018).

2.2. Ukrainian refugees in Iceland

The inflow of immigrants in Iceland in recent years has in large part been driven by Ukrainian arrivals. In 2022, applications for asylum in Iceland reached their historical peak at 4518, this was a big increase since the year before (875) and almost a quadruple increase from the previous peak in 2016 (1131). By far the largest group seeking asylum was Ukrainians, following Russia's invasion in February, or 2345 people (Útlendingastofnun, 2023). Ukrainians have remained the largest group seeking asylum in Iceland, they were 1618 in 2023 (Útlendingastofnun, 2024), 1235 in 2024 (Útlendingastofnun, 2025) and 1090 in 2025 (Andrésdóttir, 2026).

Ukrainians are a unique group of refugees as many of them come without a partner and with children and benefit from some favourable policies (OECD, 2023). Whereas the proportion of men is higher than the proportion of women in the general immigrant population in Iceland, or 56.5% men and 43.5% women, the opposite is true among Ukrainian immigrants where 55.8% are women and 44.2% are men (Byggðastofnun, n.d.).

Following the invasion in Ukraine the initial response in Iceland towards Ukrainian refugees was positive and according to an expert interviewed, the tremendous response demonstrated significant empathy for these individuals. In OECD countries, Ukrainian refugees have benefitted from some favourable policies, including having immediate access to employment after registering (OECD, 2023). In Iceland, they have nevertheless faced some hurdles in entering the labour market. They initially needed to apply for work permits, although this changed in March 2023 (Vinnumálastofnun, 2023). One year after the invasion in Ukraine (before the laws were changed) over 800 Ukrainians had received work permits. The most common work permits were for cleaning jobs and laundries and for service jobs in homes and restaurants (Stjórnarráð Íslands, 2023), that is low paid, unskilled jobs.

2.3. General description of Akureyri municipality

This study was conducted among women living in, or around Akureyri municipality, which is located in the northern part of Iceland. Akureyri had a population of just over 20.000 people at the beginning of 2025 (Hagstofa Íslands, n.d.), making it the most populous town outside the metro capital region. While the percentage of Iceland 's population with a foreign nationality was 19,8% on December 1st, 2024, in Akureyri it was only half of that or 9,6% (Þjóðskrá Íslands, 2025). In Akureyri people from Poland are the largest group of immigrants or 30,3% (on January 1st, 2025), but Ukrainians are the second largest group (12,8%) (Byggðastofnun, n.d.). The share of Ukrainians of the population in Akureyri has increased rapidly since the invasion in February 2022, in January 2022, there were only 7 people with Ukrainian citizenship, in January 2025 they were 223. (Byggðastofnun, n.d.). Data from Byggðastofnun (n.d.) shows that women were 54.3% of Ukrainians in Akureyri in January 2025, compared with 45.7% of men (this is similar to the overall percentage across the country).

Since 2021, Akureyri has been taking part in Samfló, the Coordinated Reception of Refugees. Samfló is a joint project of the municipalities, the Directorate of Labour and the Icelandic Red Cross (Akureyrarbær, n.d.), financed by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Housing (Stjórnarráð Íslands, n.d.). The programme is designed to facilitate immigration for refugees in Iceland through coordinated service delivery and improved collaboration across institutions (Akureyrarbær, n.d.).

The labour market in Akureyri has been described as varied, consisting of both skilled and unskilled jobs in various sectors. This includes tourism, the fishing industry, the research and education sector, the health sector and the service sector (Sigurjónsdóttir et al., 2018).

2.4. Reception of Ukrainian Refugees in Akureyri

Ukrainian refugees have the option of receiving arrival support from the municipality of Akureyri. This includes assistance with finding housing and schools for children. The Directorate of Labour furthermore supports their integration into the labour market. SÍMEY, a learning centre, provides Icelandic language courses for adults. According to experts interviewed, SÍMEY offers five levels of Icelandic and further courses, and has provided instruction in these courses in both Ukrainian and Russian. These courses are provided to Ukrainian refugees free of charge.

2.5. Methodology

2.5.1. Participants

In this research project, the researchers aimed to identify and analyse the labour market integration of Ukrainian women in the Akureyri region. This was done through a mix of interviews with Ukrainian women and experts working with them. The experts comprised of representatives from Akureyri Municipality, the Directorate of Labour (Vinnumálastofnun), SÍMEY continuing education centre, and the Red Cross. These are the institutions identified as playing the largest role in receiving Ukrainian refugees in Akureyri and supporting their integration into Icelandic society and labour market.

2.5.2. Data collection and data analysis

Eight Ukrainian women, who were based in the Akureyri region, were interviewed. As they came from different parts of Ukraine some spoke Ukrainian as their mother tongue and others Russian. Given that neither researcher speaks those languages and that none of the women felt confident with being interviewed in Icelandic, language barriers were a methodological challenge. Conducting the interviews solely in English would have excluded women who neither spoke Icelandic nor English but based on interviews with experts before the interviews were carried out, this is the group that faces the biggest

challenges in the labour market. Using interpreters also poses methodological issues as an interpreter may influence what participants say and meaning can be lost in translation without the researcher knowing (Egilsson et al., 2021). In this case the interpreter had to be someone who spoke both Russian and Ukrainian, but since Ukraine had been invaded by Russia it could not be someone from Russia. Furthermore, it had to be someone the women trusted so that they could speak about potentially sensitive issues. Through recommendations, the researchers contacted a woman who had lived in Iceland since before the invasion of Ukraine and had been in a position where she had helped Ukrainian refugees. The researchers assumed that therefore the participants were less likely to have trust issues with her.

Women were initially recruited by asking the experts interviewed to recommend individuals to interview and pass on information about the research. A snowballing method was subsequently used to identify more participants. During the recruitment of participants, the women were given the option of taking part in an individual interview in English (without a translator) or a focus group interview in Ukrainian/Russian. Compatible with feminist research, focus groups allow for a deep understanding of participants' views and experiences (Bender, 2013). They also allow participants to influence the direction of discussion and speak about potentially sensitive topics in general terms, rather than disclosing personal experiences.

Three women opted for individual interviews and five chose a focus group interview. The researchers aimed to find women with varied backgrounds, i.e. varying in age, whether or not they had children, whether they were married or not and varying in length of stay in Akureyri. The women were between the age of 22 and 54. Five were in a relationship/married, three were single/divorced. Four had a child/children and four did not have children. They had been in Iceland for one to three years.

The interviews were carried out between October 2024 and January 2025. They were transcribed using Avidnote. During the focus group interview questions were asked in English and translated to Russian/Ukrainian and the interpreter translated the responses

into English with regular intervals. In this way it was possible for the researchers and participants to engage in a discussion. The transcript was then used to verify the translation from the interpreter. The researchers adhered to research ethics, sought to minimize distress from participation, ensured informed consent, and anonymity of participants.

2.6. Results

2.6.1. The work situation of Ukrainian women refugees in Akureyri

All research participants had found work in Akureyri, although some were looking for new jobs as their contract had run out or was about to run out. An expert noted that Ukrainian women refugees have generally been very active on the labour market: “What characterizes the Ukrainian group more than others is their independence and willingness, an incredible readiness to work” (expert interview).

It appears that it has been positive for labour market integration that Ukrainian refugees no longer require work permits when working in Iceland. This was noted both by Ukrainians and experts.

When the first refugees came, [employers] had to ask for work permits for them. And most employers didn't want to deal with it at all. Because it's too much paperwork, it takes too long, and there are too many problems. So now it's not a problem anymore (participant in focus group interview).

One woman wanted to hire someone at her cafe, but the bureaucracy was too cumbersome; many employers have never drafted employment contracts with individuals—it's a whole different life that has made everything easier (expert interview).

It appears that Ukrainian women are highly driven to find a job as soon as possible as a part of integrating in a new society, despite being refugees, and in many cases having experienced trauma.

They do not view themselves as mere recipients of aid, nor do they wish to identify with the status of other refugees; there is also an underlying desire to

distance themselves from the turmoil occurring in their homeland (expert interview).

According to participants in the research, there is a significant incentive to find work because the allowance refugees receive is quite low compared to the cost of living.

I think just a desire to live my own life with my own money, like I wanted, and to be able to buy what I want. Because I mean you have just a little bit. I think it's around 200.000 [Icelandic króna] you get from refugee money, and it is just enough to pay for your groceries and to pay for your apartment. In most cases it's not even like groceries, just apartment, because the price of my house is kind of high right now (participant in an individual interview).

This encourages women to find work even if it is not suited to their previous work experience.

You have to look even below what you were expecting. Like, I was ready to do everything because I understand that I cannot live on this refugee money. I don't want to do it. I would love to provide for myself, and I would love to spend money as I want (participant in individual interview).

The participants in the research had a varied background when it came to education and work experience. The majority held university degrees, as is the case for most Ukrainian women based in the Akureyri region (according to expert interviews). Their prior jobs in Ukraine, had included work in financial management, being a psychologist, being a teacher and work in human resources management. In comparison, their work since coming to Iceland included working in a fish factory, cleaning jobs, working in kindergartens (both kitchen work and work with children), and working as an assistant in primary school. Thus, despite their qualifications, they were accepting jobs in low skilled positions. These findings show a significant underutilization of their skills in the labour market.

I can't remember any woman who has directly secured a job related to her qualifications. There was once a dentist with 17 years of experience. A dental clinic was advertising for an assistant, but she was not allowed to apply. She did not meet the language requirements (expert interview).

This pattern reflects a broader trend observed in research on immigrant labour market integration, where highly educated migrants often enter the labour market through low-skilled positions before gradually moving into roles more closely matching their qualifications.

When participants were asked about it, only one participant could mention a Ukrainian woman who had found a job in Akureyri matching her education and experience, unfortunately the researchers were unable to verify this through an interview with this individual.

Despite this, most of the women were thankful for getting away from the war and being able to provide for themselves. “My work doesn’t match my specialty here. But I’m absolutely fine with that. And it’s okay, I don’t have a bad job. There’s just a small salary” (participant in focus group).

There were nevertheless indications that the longer they stayed in the country, the keener they were to find positions that matched their experience better.

Some would argue that securing employment is sufficient for everyone's satisfaction, yet the critical question remains whether individuals find themselves positioned correctly within the job market. Whether they find work matching their educational level or whether they are merely occupying jobs that Icelanders don’t want (expert interview).

During individual and focus group interviews, the researchers asked about perceived differences between finding work in Akureyri and in Reykjavík. One participant noted that she thought it was a bit more difficult to find work in Akureyri, even if she had found a job there quickly. Another, younger, interviewee said that she had no trouble finding work that she was satisfied with in Akureyri. It took her only a week. A third participant, who had found work both in Reykjavík and Akureyri, felt it was more difficult to find work in Akureyri.

It's understandable because in Reykjavík you have more spots where you just need English. Like souvenirs. Selling souvenirs and service, food, hotels. And here it's way less (participant in individual interview).

In general participants were unsure whether it would be more difficult to find appropriate work with regards to their education and experience in Akureyri than in Reykjavík.

I mean probably they have more job openings [in Reykjavík]. But I would say it's probably all the same. The town is smaller, so of course you would have less opportunities to play somewhere. But probably just the same job (participant in individual interview).

An expert noted that Reykjavík has a larger and more diverse labour market and it might be easier for highly educated women to find work there but that in other ways it is easier to assist Ukrainian refugee women with finding work in smaller communities.

During the interviews, the researchers picked up on the trend that the younger interviewees appeared to be more positive about their prospects and their experience with the labour market.

During individual interviews that were conducted with two women of university age, they were positive about their prospects, were seeking an education and did feel that they had had an easy time with finding work.

It is not common for them [Ukrainian women in Akureyri] to speak English, but there are a few young women who speak good English—these are usually the ones who do not put in the effort to learn Icelandic (expert interview).

One of them who started out in Reykjavík described it this way:

I started working in Reykjavík first just through Alfred². Yes. Sending applications. It was not that difficult for me at that time I had English so it was enough to find job in service in a restaurant. And then I was in the retail like the souvenir store. It was pretty easy for me to find (participant in individual interview).

In comparison, an older interviewee with more education and experience who was further into her career described a lot of frustration with her situation. She had struggled with finding work, did not feel that the social workers, nor the directorate of labour, were supporting her adequately and mentioned as an example that her first job was cleaning

² Alfred is a popular Icelandic website used for recruitment.

and after having worked for two days the employer stopped replying to her: “It's difficult. You can't imagine how many of my resumes I sent on Alfred” (participant in individual interview).

When analysing the labour market integration of Ukrainian women in the context of identifying barriers the following themes were identified: the Icelandic language, recognition of qualifications, network, gendered labour market, and age.

2.6.2. The Icelandic language

As mentioned, in chapter 2.1, the lack of Icelandic skills among immigrants in Iceland is a particular challenge for labour market integration. This appears to also be the case for the Ukrainian refugees, despite arrival support which includes Icelandic language classes. According to an expert, when Ukrainian women are finding their footing in the local labour market, limited language knowledge has been the biggest barrier. Women who initially can communicate in English or are quick to learn Icelandic are quicker to navigate matters in society in general and at work. According to participants in the research this can directly impact their efforts to find work suitable with their education and work experience.

I would definitely not find a job with my bachelor education here which is in economics and business. Because I would have to know Icelandic (participant in individual interview).

When asked about the main barrier to labour market integration many participants mentioned the Icelandic language. Some participants were very keen to learn Icelandic, in order to achieve long term success in Iceland.

I'm trying to learn this language because I want to build my life over here. I don't want to go back. I would rather struggle right now for a year or two and then be happy (participant in individual interview).

This included, on top of taking courses at SÍMEY, getting private lessons that they paid for themselves, despite limited funds. Some participants discussed the issue of perfectionism when it comes to learning a new language.

I will not speak until I know that this is the right form to use. And this is stopping me from using a language enough like properly enough. But I'm trying, I'm doing all I can. I'm seated at home, I'm reading this book. I'm trying to interact and trying to learn something. I'm trying, I'm just. I'm interested (participant in individual interview).

It seems that in some workplaces it is not taken into consideration that refugees who have recently come to the country have not had a chance to learn the language.

It was my first job here. It was my first day. And they tried to explain to me what I should do, in Icelandic. And it was like... wow, it was really stressful. I was crying at home because I didn't understand what I should do here (participant in focus group).

One participant noted that she thought that the language barrier could be higher for women seeking work than men due to the nature of gender-segregated work.

I think the selection of jobs is different for men and women. And maybe for men it's a bit easier to get something connected with cars or building because they don't need to speak that much Icelandic, I think. Yeah. And for women we are more into communicating with people and Icelandic is more required in there. But I don't know, like honestly (participant in individual interview).

There were also instances where learning the language did not appear to be enough for success in the labour market, which led to a sentiment that the effort of learning Icelandic was not worth it. One of the participants in the focus group mentioned the case of a foreign co-worker who had worked hard to speak Icelandic fluently and even received a university level education in his field in Iceland. This person was given a chance at a "higher level" position at their work but was demoted again.

They gave him a chance to try, well, temporarily, to sort things out. And then they put him back in his old job... We're all in the same situation. And looking at this story, we have no interest in learning Icelandic. Because we don't see any prospects, even with its presence. (participant in focus group).

The Icelandic labour market is unique in that people are able to access some jobs without Icelandic if they speak English. There is for instance a vast number of jobs available for English speaking people for instance in tourism. Speaking English therefore appeared to help initially with finding work but as participants noted, Icelandic is still key: "It is easier

to find a job but it doesn't guarantee you to work in at like the top. Right! It just guarantees you a little bit easier way.”

Additionally, as an expert noted, the women who speak good English when they arrive are usually the ones who do not put in the effort to learn Icelandic, which can hinder further development in the labour market as the language is necessary: “Once individuals acquire proficiency in English, they make a significant stride forward; nevertheless, fluency in Icelandic is essential for genuine integration into society.”

Although some of the Ukrainian refugees interviewed had been in Iceland for almost three years, not one participant deemed their knowledge of Icelandic language as good enough to be interviewed in Icelandic. Both experts and Ukrainian participants critiqued the availability of Icelandic language courses. While basic courses exist, there is a lack of more advanced options, which can hinder continued language development. SÍMEY offers various levels of instruction, but the need for more comprehensive and advanced courses is evident from the expert interviews and interviews with Ukrainian women.

2.6.3. Recognition of Qualifications

According to the expert interviews there appears to be a reluctance to recognize the qualifications of Ukrainian citizens, which limits their employment opportunities. Whilst people coming from countries within the European Union (and Switzerland) can according to a regulation have their education recognised in Iceland, it is much harder for citizens of other countries to receive similar validation.

There is a systemic reluctance here to recognize qualifications from other countries, whether at the university level or in the trades or even licences to work with machinery. It would greatly benefit individuals who do not share the language if their skills could be properly recognized (expert interview).

Another expert noted that it is relatively difficult to have educational qualifications assessed; it is a complicated process. This expert was aware for instance of child psychologists and dentists working in cleaning roles at hotels. This expert further noted that Icelanders seem somewhat rigid when it comes to education and if there is not a

shortage of workers with a certain education, for instance dentists, then exceptions will not be made to the requirements.

Naturally, the immense knowledge that these individuals possess, all their education and experience, is invaluable and integrating them into our community would be fantastic (expert interview).

Another expert noted that it can be difficult to obtain work permits even if a qualification is recognised.

[There are] few success stories emerging of individuals receiving recognition for their qualifications. It is disheartening that individuals cannot even have their university qualifications evaluated between Icelandic institutions. They often find work in cleaning, hospitality, or even highly educated individuals undertaking roles such as changing bed linens in hotels (expert interview).

2.6.4. Lack of Social Network

Ukrainian refugees have certain characteristics that may facilitate their integration (e.g. existing social networks, educational profile and certain goodwill as a group, comparatively) (OECD, 2022). Nevertheless, they appear to face the same hurdle as other immigrants in Iceland which is the lack of an Icelandic network. Especially in small societies, like Akureyri, it is common that people get work through informal channels. For example, someone they know may tell them about a vacant job, which may never be advertised formally. Those hiring are prone to hire someone they already know or who is recommended to them by someone who knows them. When a young participant who was finishing a university degree was asked what the best way would be to help her get the job she wanted, she answered that it would probably be to get to know people who are working in her field.

It's really important here to have some Icelandic friends that can like tell you, okay, you can try here or there [to find a job]... I've got this job at the school because my [Icelandic] boyfriend works there, and he said that I can show up from time to time and that was great for me because I wanted to work with kids. But if I would have to do it on my own, I think yeah, I would have much more problems with that (participant in individual interview).

As one participant described it, people can be fearful of having to find work with no existing network. This can be a large barrier when looking for work: “It's actually kind of scary to go and to knock and tell them, I need work. I was ready to do everything and just knocking at every door” (participant in individual interview). An expert further noted the importance of being able to receive references from locals: “I also sense in the interviews that those who have been employed here, once their first job ends, they want references; they know it is crucial that someone can vouch for them.”

2.6.5. A gendered labour market

OECD (2022) notes that certain characteristics may hinder Ukrainian refugees in their integration, such as being single mothers with children.

There are some indications that this has impacted those in Akureyri. One participant in the focus group noted that the first thing that she was asked in job interviews is the age of her children.

An expert also mentioned that in some areas of Ukraine, women tend to stay home longer with their children after they are born than in Iceland (where parental leave is 12 months). This could impact women’s labour market participation if they have small children.

As mentioned above, some participants believed that it was easier for men than women to find work in Iceland. They pointed out the fact that women are more likely to be working with children and in the health sector, this required a higher barrier to entry.

I know some men here and they're usually taking jobs as mechanics. And maybe doing something with things [but] not with people. The men I know they just know what to do with cars, let's say. Or they know how to build. So it's more of a physical thing. So it could be a bit easier. Yeah, maybe a bit (participant in individual interview).

An expert noted with regards to finding work appropriate for their education and experience that it has sometimes been better for men.

It has [been] better in places like Iðjan and other industrial jobs where men with experience as auto mechanics have secured such jobs, but not women, as they do not have those types of jobs (expert interview).

2.6.6. Identified enablers for labour market participation

Multiple enablers for labour market participation were also identified during the interviews. This included university courses offered at the University of Akureyri in English. They enabled Ukrainian women to further their education, with credentials that are recognised in Iceland, as well as building a network for future employment.

The language courses offered at SÍMEY were also considered enablers, though as mentioned above there has been criticism with the range of Icelandic courses available. SÍMEY however additionally offers the course, Skólasmiðja, in Russian. Skólasmiðjan aims to train people with another language than Icelandic to work in schools and kindergartens, this includes a workplace training period.

Skólasmiðja has been popular and internships were mentioned as options to enable Ukrainian women to get work experience and their foot through the door, or some sort of trial period for them. During interviews it was mentioned that perhaps courses like this could be offered for work in other fields than education.

I think it would be helpful to provide them [with] the job at least for one or two months to try a trial period, not only cleaning. Because the people usually have a good experience. I know even the lady who is a really experienced and very good cook. And nobody wanted to take her to the kitchen (expert interview).

The support offered by Akureyri municipality and the Directorate of Labour was also considered among enablers. However, it was criticised that many women were able to work in schools following the completion of the Skólasmiðja course on a grant paid for by the Directorate of Labour for six months but at the end of that period they lost their jobs. These women would have happily continued working at the schools, where they felt they were making progress both at work and with learning Icelandic. One participant noted

that she was replaced by another Ukrainian women in this programme which she believed was convenient for the school as they received a grant to pay her.

I got a job through Akureyrarbær's programme for Ukrainians, working in a kindergarten. It's all kitchen work. I started in August, and the contract is for a maximum of six months. My contract with Akureyrarbær ends on February 2nd, and I don't know where I'll be working next, or if I'll be working at all (participant in focus group).

And Akureyri helped me. I got a job at [name of school has been omitted]. For 6 months. But I worked until December. In December my contract ended. And I started working at a hotel, in cleaning. And again I went back to school in September. And worked until October. Because the programme finished. Now I'm trying to find work. But I think I can go back to the hotel (participant in focus group).

2.6.7. Perceptions on settlement in Akureyri

Most of the participants in the research enjoyed living in a more remote region of the country and talked about the benefits of living in a smaller town and to be involved in the community. Some were surprised by how welcome they felt in Iceland.

I understand that for Iceland it is shocking to have so many people coming and it was super welcoming and I have not expected any of the support that we had (participant in individual interview).

One participant did note some rising resentment towards refugees, for instance when enquiring about renting an apartment, the owner informed her that he did not rent to Ukrainians.

The researchers did not particularly discuss the participants' vision for their children's (or the next generation's) labour market opportunities but the participants did discuss settlement plans with regards to their children or future children. When asked about future plans, most of the women interviewed planned to stay in the area.

[I] was thinking about having a family, having a kid. Maybe in two years. So, we have to think about like how to raise a child. And we wanted to be in a safer environment because I mean the safety level in Iceland, is surprisingly and

shockingly good. And I wasn't even expecting it. So, I would rather stay here. For my future child (participant in individual interview).

The expert interview with an Akureyri municipality representative indicated that most Ukrainian refugees have come with the intention of settling in Akureyri, especially the women. It is worth noting that a number of participants talked about the stress related to not knowing for how long they can stay in the country and therefore they find it difficult to make future plans. A participant in the research who had pursued further education related to the job she received in Iceland put it this way:

It's psychologically difficult because we don't know legally how long we can stay. And you put in a lot of effort to integrate here. And then suddenly, it could all be in vain. That thought is very upsetting. But I really like it. I like the work. That's why I also decided to study in this field. In the future, I hope to finish my studies and maybe advance in this area (participant in focus group).

Others pointed out that they need to earn enough money to be self-sufficient, should their status as asylum holder change.

We have no idea if Iceland is going to kick us out. So we have to know and we have to have some money behind it and we have to save. I mean, in case anything happened (participant in individual interview).

3. Swedish Case Study

Authors: Zuzana Macuchova and Ulf Hansson

3.1. Swedish background

After initially being an emigration country, in the post-war period, Sweden has experienced several distinct waves of migration. The period between the 1950s and 1970s was mainly dominated by influx of labour migrants from other Nordic as well as European countries (Lundh & Ohlsson 1999). During the 1970s and 1980s, the composition of migrations gradually shifted as humanitarian (refugees and asylum seekers) grew in importance alongside labour migration (Ansala et al., 2018). Since the mid-1980s, the migration has been dominated by refugees and asylum seekers. This refugee oriented phase reached a clear peak in 2015, when over 160,000 people applied for asylum in Sweden, representing one of the highest per-capita asylum intakes in the European Union that year. In the years that followed, the number of asylum applications declined markedly and remained substantially lower than the 2015 level.

Because Sweden has received a relatively large share of refugees and asylum seekers in recent decades, there is a substantial body of research on different aspects of integration, including how people become established in the labour market and what kinds of jobs they enter. Several studies have highlighted the large employment gap between natives and immigrants in Sweden and the time it takes for people born outside Sweden to establish themselves in the labour market (see for example Forslund et al. 2017; Ruist 2018; Ek & Skedinger, 2019; Engdahl & Liljeberg 2022; Bolvig et al. 2022; Thalberg & Liljeberg 2022). Research has also found that people born outside Sweden also tend to be employed in more precarious and lower skilled jobs than people born in Sweden (Joyce 2015; Elgenius et al. 2024; Andersson & Josefsson 2025).

Sweden, like other OECD countries, shows also large differences when it comes to the labour market outcomes of female and male immigrants (OECD, 2024a). What previous

research from elsewhere, not just in Sweden, has highlighted is the difficulty, particularly for women amongst recently arrived migrants, in securing employment (Fasanai, et al. 2022). Much of this gap is explained by women's care responsibilities, both at arrival and through continued fertility after arrival. Thus, even in Sweden, with longstanding policies promoting female employment, immigrant women's employment is conditioned by the gender-traditionality of their source countries (see for example Grönlund and Fairbrother, 2022).

3.2. Ukrainian refugees in Sweden

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, displacement from Ukraine has escalated rapidly, creating one of the largest and fastest-moving refugee movements in Europe since the Second World War. Within a short period, millions of people left Ukraine, most of them women and children, seeking safety in neighbouring countries and across Europe, including Sweden. The Swedish Government implemented the European Union (EU) Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) on 4 March 2022. This directive provides temporary protection to Ukrainian nationals and others affected by the conflict, granting them residence permits, access to the labour market, accommodation, medical care, education for minors, and social and welfare assistance.

According to data from the Swedish Migration Agency there were, in 2024, 38,431 individuals registered with a TPD permit in Sweden. Of them, 44% were adult women, 30% were adult men and 26% were children. At the end of 2024, 35,500 Ukrainian citizens were registered in Sweden (SCB, 2025).

In comparison with other migrant groups the Ukrainian refugees arrived under the TPD which granted them immediate access to the labour market. Many were also of work age and with relatively high levels of education. These characteristics set them apart from earlier refugee groups in Sweden and enabled a faster and broader initial entry into employment. In 2023, 56% of the Ukrainians were employed, and this share increased to

66% in 2024 were in employment (International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2023, 2024; Shmulyar Gréen & Odynets, 2024).

3.3. General description of Dalarna

The geographical focus of the Swedish case study was set on Ukrainian women living in the municipalities of Falun and Borlänge. The municipality of Falun is the regional administrative centre of Dalarna, hosting county and municipal authorities, a university campus, and the county hospital. Borlänge is known for its industrial profile (steel; previously paper mill) and for housing the national transport administration, Trafikverket. The Falun and Borlänge municipalities function as a shared labour market region, with a high degree of daily commuting between the two municipalities. Falun and Borlänge are also the two largest municipalities in Dalarna county. At the end of 2024, Falun had about 59,945 registered residents and Borlänge about 51,425 (SCB, 2025).

Dalarna County is in the central part of Sweden, roughly two hours from Stockholm, bordering Norway in the northwest. In 2025, Dalarna's population was 288,287. As Sweden has become a receiving country for migration in recent decades, these national developments are also reflected in regional population composition. The proportion of foreign-born people of working age (20-64 years) in Dalarna has gradually increased over the past 20 years, from 7.2 percent in 2000 to 17.4 percent in 2024 (Region Dalarna).

The largest foreign-born groups in the county originate from Syria, Somalia, Eritrea, Thailand, Iraq, and Finland (SCB, 2025). By contrast, Ukrainians constituted a small group prior to Russia's invasion, before 2022, fewer than 200 Ukrainian-born residents lived in Dalarna (SCB, 2025), out of those approximately 20 in both municipalities forming our case study.

3.4. Reception of Ukrainians in Dalarna County

The TPD protection meant in practice, that Ukrainians who were granted this protection, received a temporary residence permit in Sweden and could either arrange their own

housing or get help through the Swedish Migration Agency's reception system. In that case, municipalities were responsible for arranging housing. The Migration Agency then uses a quota-based distribution system to assign individuals to municipalities, where each municipality receives a number of places it is expected to provide.

In 2022, 830 places in total were allocated to the municipalities of Dalarna county, in 2023, this amount dropped to 365 places, in 2024, 194 places were allocated and in 2025 157 places. Meanwhile, the number of actual individuals who arrived to the municipalities fluctuated on the county level between 406 (in 2022), 199 (in 2023) and 121 (in 2024). In 2025, approximately 90 individuals moved to some of the municipalities in the county.

Falun was allocated the highest share of the Ukrainians refugees in the county. Ukrainians that arrived in Falun got help from the municipality with housing, as well as assistance with finding places in local schools for the children. The municipality also provided services, such as helping to facilitate access to employment/labour market. The municipality also worked extensively with external agencies, such as Folkuniversitetet and other civil society groups, particularly as the Ukrainian refugees were not entitled to Swedish language classes organised by the municipality.

3.5. Methodology

3.5.1. Participants

The respondents of the Swedish case study were recruited among Ukrainian women who arrived in Sweden after the Russian invasion in February 2022, under the provisions of the TPD. The primary focus was on women residing in municipalities of Falun and Borlänge. The main criterion for inclusion was that the women were employed but there were no requirements regarding the type of employment contract the respondents had. Most of the interviewees arrived during the first months after the full-scale invasion from March 2022 to June 2022, and one of the respondents arrived in November 2022.

The interviewees were aged between 30 and 55 years and six of the nine had children. Most interviewees – seven - were married and several of them had husbands living in Ukraine. Two participants reported being single. In terms of professional backgrounds in Ukraine, the participants worked in Ukraine as project managers and HR management, in accounting, in logistics and physiotherapy. All the interviewees held at least secondary degree education and several of them had university diplomas in different fields.

Among the interviewees are women with full-time- and part-time contracts, as well as those employed through so called 'Instegsjobb' (entry-level jobs). Their current workplaces encompassed administration, logistics, catering and coffee shops, home care of elderly and self-employment/entrepreneurship.

Two interviews were also carried out with coordinators from the local municipality who were involved in facilitating the arrival of the Ukrainian refugees.

3.5.2. Data collection and data analysis

The data collection in Sweden was conducted between January 2025 and May 2025. Interviewees were initially recruited with help from local civil-society organizations, and a snowball sampling method was then used to identify other respondents. The interviews were carried out at places convenient to the respondents but also on the campus of Högskolan Dalarna and in two occasions in local coffeeshops. The interview language was English and Swedish; the interviews lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and were all recorded. Interviews were recorded anonymously, and after the interview, transcribed.

The study got ethical approval from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Dnr 2024-07867-01) for collection of empirical data. Respondents were informed prior to each of the interviews, on the ethical principles about anonymity and confidentiality and on their right to withdraw their agreement at any time. The researchers obtained informed consent from all individual participants prior to the interviews.

To analyse the data, Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) six-phase framework for thematic analysis consisting of (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. The codes were generated both inductively and deductively, and assigned to total four themes, describing the facilitators and obstacles of the labour market entry.

3.6 Results

3.6.1. Voluntary work as the starting point

A first clear message that came up from the conducted interviews was how common it was among the respondents that they engaged with various unpaid voluntary tasks, several of them only a few days after they arrived to the municipality. Their stories painted a picture of how the Ukrainian women, instead of just passively waiting to see what will happen, search actively for possibilities such as volunteering in second hand stores, helping in the local gyms or offering translation help during various events targeted to Ukrainians. A common message in these interviews was that this helped women to stay active and get back some sense of control over their life, and in this way partly compensated the stress related to the invasion. As one of the interviewees, who started volunteering in a second-hand store, explained:

When we arrived in Sweden, we didn't want to just sit and wait and read the news. I thought we needed to do something else, so we asked — we want to work. We do not speak Swedish, but we can work.

Her emphasis on doing something else rather than passively wait highlights how even voluntary, unpaid work became important for the individuals. Similarly, another respondent described how she helped with translation from Ukrainian language to English language, on behalf of one of the civic society actors, providing projects for Ukrainian refugees, before she eventually found formal paid employment:

I was kind of helping at (...) before... I helped a lot during visits, translating when needed.

I usually tried to answer as many questions as I could. I tried to help as much as I could with my limited Swedish back then.

Another woman described volunteering at a reception desk of a local gym, only a few hours every week, mainly as a way to practice Swedish and meet people:

I helped out in the reception for two hours a week, tidying up and doing small tasks. It allowed me to meet people and practice my Swedish.

These quotes illustrate how voluntary pre-employment helped provide structure before a more formal job opportunity emerged. It is also interesting to note that in most cases, these voluntary roles that the respondents took, were found and arranged by the women themselves, without assistance from civil society actors or the municipality, which are discussed in the next theme.

3.6.2. Civil society and key individuals

All nine interviewed Ukrainian women were, at the time the interviews were conducted, employed. Their jobs included administrative work, logistics, catering and coffee shops, home care services for older people, and self-employment or entrepreneurship. Employment contracts ranged from full-time and part-time positions to hourly work. The jobs were found in both smaller local companies and larger transnational companies operating in one of the two municipalities. Some respondents were still in the same job they had when they first entered the labour market, while others had changed jobs over time, and a few were actively looking for new positions.

From the conducted interviews, it was very apparent that civil society actors played an important role in assisting the women with finding jobs. All nine interviewees, at some point in the interview, mentioned the assistance they received from civil society actors active in the region.

Several of the interviewed women mentioned projects run by ABF (Workers' Educational Association), Folkuniversitetet (an adult educational association), and other local actors as their first support toward labour-market entry. These projects were targeting Ukrainians refugees as a group and ranged from providing a forum to meet with other Ukrainian refugees, help with writing CVs, translation of document, and most importantly, introductory contacts with employers. As one respondent recalled:

Folkuniversitetet runs a project funded by the European Social Fund for Ukrainians. As the project developed, it became more targeted towards supporting individual Ukrainian jobseekers. Within this project they helped participants write CVs, verify educational certificates, and translate documents from Ukrainian. They also pointed us to places and events where we could meet employers, hand over our CVs, or have short interviews.

From the interviews, it was also evident that when it comes to the initial contacts with local companies, they were often created through a small number of key people, active in the civil society organisations. Much of this work happened through their personal social networks. These key individuals knew who to contact, had existing relationships with local employers, and could help to open doors that would otherwise have stayed closed. In practice, they were the ones who took the initiative, made the first calls, and kept the dialogue going. In several of the interviews, they were described as deeply committed and persistent, especially when things moved slowly or became complicated. One respondent illustrated this by describing how she got her first job through a persistent project leader:

It's run by XY, and she really helped. She joined Z (civil society actor) and they joined a project. She came in and [...] she got this job for me, and another for another woman.

In the interview, this respondent described in great detail how this key individual actively pushed the company in question to create a position. Although the outcome was not immediate, it eventually resulted in a long-term position for the respondent, in a role only slightly below her qualification level, despite her limited knowledge of Swedish

Another interviewee also gave the picture that in practice, entering the labour market very much came down to native individuals who were in a position of influence, who had

social networks, or who knew someone else who could help. And who were interested in *making things happen*. This woman, who was also, after only a couple of months in Sweden, offered an administrative role at a local logistics company, put it like this:

There is still this kind man who took us to the company Z. It was actually him who was convincing other people in the company to take us in. There is not always this person who supports and tells them: “Do take them in”.

One of the interviewees was offered a short internship at a local accounting firm through a new acquaintance, in the same type of role she had previously in Ukraine. Even though it did not result in a permanent job, it was clear that the opportunity was important to her. She described it as something that would not have happened without her acquaintance and the contacts she had:

We met Swedish people, and I met my current friend. And she asked if I had worked in Ukraine as an accountant. I said yes. She asked if I had tried that job in Sweden. I said no, I don’t speak Swedish. You must know it as an economist. I’m smart, but I don’t know Swedish. Her husband had a friend, and I got a two-month internship.

Another participant described how she was offered a simple job at a catering company through a local woman who was active in a civil society organisation and also had her own network of contacts: “XX comes and asks, “Do you want to try dishwashing there?” I said OK. So, I started washing dishes there.”

It was clear from the interviews that support from people involved in civil society was not limited to help with jobs and work contacts. It often continued into everyday life and the practical process of settling in. Several participants described how these individuals helped with finding or arranging housing, getting clothes when needed, and communicating with different institutions. This could involve making phone calls, helping with letters and forms, or accompanying appointments. Support also included guidance around children’s schooling, such as contact with schools, understanding routines, and dealing with practical questions as they came up. As one of the interviewees put it:

Every day XY comes with lots of clothes, things...food. She asks how we are, she asks how things are for us. Do you have food? Maybe we need to buy clothes. Same with XZ. Every time, they help us.

Another interviewee, belonging to those that did not arrive through the earlier mentioned allocation quota, recalled how local people and the Svenska Kyrkan (Church of Sweden) reached out to shortly after their arrival, after reading an article in local newspapers and offered housing:

XX heard about us, and so did the Svenska kyrkan. They found out about us in the newspaper. After Främby Udde, we started living in Hosjö—in their house. They also began helping us.

To conclude, the interviews show that civil society actors were central both for finding the first job and for practical help with the everyday life in the first period in Sweden. For many women, access to work and support often depended on specific local individuals who had the right contacts and were willing to act. Even when the women did not yet have their own social networks in Sweden, they were able to access opportunities through the networks of these key individuals, who opened doors and helped to facilitate the first contacts.

3.6.3. Dual role of the Swedish language

Another recurring theme, emerging across the interviews was the role of Swedish. For several of the interviewed women, limited Swedish was a clear barrier to work and made it harder to find a position corresponding to their former position in Ukraine. At the same time, several women described language learning as something they could actively work on and use to move forward. And a few of the interviewees, actually got a position, only slightly below their qualification level, despite limited knowledge of Swedish. Therefore, it is difficult to categorize language as either purely a constraint or enabler to labour market entry.

Several of the interviewees named that requirements for Swedish fluency as the main reason for why they did not apply for positions that matched their education or work

experience from Ukraine. This was also highlighted by a worker from the municipality who described the experiences of one of the Ukrainian women:

XY has had an economics job, a higher-level economics job in Ukraine. But she had now realized that she would take anything, and she said the other day that she was going to an interview at a restaurant.

A few of the interviewees described how Swedish was treated as a basic requirement by employers, which became especially clear in job fairs and employer meetings, even though these events were organised as part of projects aimed at Ukrainian women. This was striking, since many participants had been in Sweden for only a few months and could not reasonably be expected to speak fluent Swedish at that stage. One respondent recalled a specific job fair where employers were expected to recruit new staff, but where it quickly became clear that a good command of Swedish was still assumed

The biggest problem was that nobody needed employees, and nobody wanted employees who didn't speak Swedish and sometimes barely spoke English.

I've attended several meetings with employers, and all I heard was: "Do you speak Swedish?" If I said, "Not that good," "No, thank you". Or "We're not currently employing."

Even respondents with strong education and good English felt that English rarely opened doors. Some described putting their professions on pause and waiting until their Swedish improved before applying for jobs matching their background.

At the same time, a few interviewees described finding a job quickly even with only basic Swedish. One respondent found her first job through a Folkuniversitetet project. After taking part in the project for around two months, she attended an employer event, left her CV, and was later contacted by a large local employer. She started as a summer worker in transport planning and then continued in a logistics-related role, working basically with the same kind of tasks as in Ukraine.

On the other hand, Swedish language also appeared in the domain where the women could exercise their agency. One of the interviewees mentioned, how she started exercising the Swedish language while she was still in the Migration office arrival centre

on the suburb of Stockholm, by simply reading and guessing the meanings of different signs on the streets.

Other respondent recalled how she in her workplace had required that all the communication and interactions would be in Swedish, not because it made life easier, but because it would help her to improve her knowledge of Swedish:

When I came to the company X as summer worker, my boss told the whole team. OK, she does not know Swedish, so we will speak English. So, the entire department started to speak English. But I said no, but they wanted to do it for me, so I can feel a part of the team. But when I got the next position, the temporary position, I asked them, “no more English.” So now all the meetings and working discussion are in Swedish. Now it is OK, but it is still quite difficult to understand.

Another respondent described how she initially was not allowed to study Swedish through the official courses provided to migrants, not coming through the TPD. When eventually it became possibility to study Swedish through the civil society actors, she started to use the same software she was using in her former position of project leader, to schedule her learning of Swedish, to more effectively combine courses from several actors:

I used my project management program to schedule my studies while I was unemployed. I attended courses at ABF three times a week and at Folkuniversitetet twice a week. When I finally got in, I cleared three parts of SFI within three months.

Another example of how respondents tried to make language learning work in practice was described by one woman who contacted the municipality to explain that completing the course within four months was not realistic alongside her job. After discussing the issue, she was allowed to spread the course over a full year instead, which made it easier to combine work and Swedish studies

Shortly, from the interviews it was apparent that Swedish language skills shaped what jobs felt possible, requirements for Swedish often meant that women postponed applying for positions matching their education and work experience or accepted that they first needed to language-wise before being taken seriously by employers. At the same time,

several respondents described language learning as something they could actively work on. They structured their days around courses, combined different providers, and deliberately chose Swedish in workplace interactions even when English would have been easier. Thus, taken together, the interviews show that language was not only a barrier in hiring, but also a tool for moving forward.

3.6.4 Pragmatic choices, taking what jobs are available

The Ukrainian women interviewed had different types of contracts and job positions. Two interviewees) had full-time contracted position, approximately corresponding to their formal education and work experience from Ukraine. The remaining seven interviewees worked on positions that required less qualified positions, compared to their former work experiences from Ukraine.

Although most of the interviewees had positions below their qualification level, and could therefore be perceived as experiencing occupational mismatch, the interviewees were happy and satisfied, and did not seem to take this negatively.

It appeared, that in several cases, it was meant as strategic decision to take a job below one's qualification level, even when these involved for example physically demanding work. One respondent, previously employed as an auditor in an office setting, described how she approached physically demanding work despite having no prior experience with such tasks: "I didn't work physically in Ukraine. I worked in an office, as an accountant. But no problem, I can." She and a friend accepted hard manual labour in a local rent-a-tent company, even when it was physically challenging. From the interview it was apparent how keen and motivated the interviewee and her friend were to work in this position:

It was a difficult job for a woman. Because we are small, me and my friend. But we thought we are strong women, so we have to work.

Other respondents described being assigned to various tasks that were only loosely related to their qualifications. One participant explained how she had been moved around

in the company where she was offered job before settling into a repetitive administrative role:

They moved us around then to do different jobs here and there, and now, it is mostly the invoices and orders, and I need to look through them and do such things.

Another respondent described how she initially focused on working within her qualification area, but shifted focus as the time passed and found a simpler job in a catering company instead:

I could also sit and just wait and complain, that I am an accountant, that I have a diploma. That I only want to work in an office. But that's not the case. I worked as an accountant because I could speak Ukrainian well. Now you are in Sweden, you have to live like a Swede. Okay, if you learn the language quickly, then sure, you can have the job at the office.

3.6.5. Institutional support in the background

As highlighted previously, most concrete support related to job searching, described in the interviews came from civil society actors. Public institutions were much less visible in respondents' stories describing their path to the job. Civil society organizations and key individuals repeatedly emerged as those that facilitated contact and were practically helpful, whereas contact with state actors, most notably Arbetsförmedlingen (the Swedish Employment Agency), was described as mostly limited. These contacts encompassed typically tasks such as submitting CVs and reporting job-search activities, which participants described as bureaucratic requirements rather than meaningful, real support to find a job. As one of the interviewees put it:

I had been registered with Arbetsförmedlingen for half a year and sending in reports, but I never really got help through them.

I started looking for jobs and went to all the meetings and wrote CVs and registered with Arbetsförmedlingen, but it didn't help - we have just to send and report what we do to search for jobs. Nothing more.

In fact, some respondents had gained employment through so-called "Introduktionsjobb", a scheme administered by the Arbetsförmedlingen. However, their narratives suggest they still did not perceive the Employment Agency as actively involved in the process and appearing only in the background as a funding body.³

To conclude, the interviews suggest that labour market entry was mainly supported through civil society contacts, while Arbetsförmedlingen was experienced largely as an administrative requirement rather than an active source of help, even when it was involved through schemes such as introduktionsjobb.

³ With the introductory job, the employer receives financial compensation when hiring someone who has been unemployed for a long time or who has recently arrived in Sweden. An introductory job can be combined with studies aimed at the profession, supplementary upper secondary education or studies in Swedish, and the studies should contribute to strengthening the employee's position in the labor market.

4. Norwegian Case Study

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4.1. Background on refugees in Norway

Among the Nordic countries, Norway has received the highest total number of Ukrainian refugees. As of November 2024, Norway accounted for a total of 33 percent of valid permits granted to Ukrainians in the Nordic region (UDI, 2025a).

In March 2022, Norway implemented a scheme granting temporary collective protection to Ukrainians fleeing the war, which also involved the right to work and access to integration programmes (Tronstad et al., 2025). Under collective protection⁴ a permit is granted for one year and may be renewed or extended for up to a total of five years (UDI, 2026a). However, the increasing number of arrivals sparked concerns around issues such as municipalities' capacity to resettle and integrate the increasing number of refugees and general pressure on the welfare system. Subsequently, the government began to abolish certain policies that once favoured the Ukrainian refugees. Unlike other refugee groups, Ukrainians were previously allowed to travel back to their country and re-enter Norway without losing their protection status. At the end of 2023, this exemption was abolished (Tronstad et al., 2025). Additionally, the collective protection scheme became stricter, excluding, for example, Ukrainians with dual citizenship in another safe third country (Tronstad et al., 2025). As of January 2025, the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI, 2025b) expanded the list of regions in Ukraine considered less exposed and therefore not covered by the collective protection scheme. In total, 14 regions are now regarded as safe following an asylum-law assessment.

⁴ The permit does not form a basis for a permanent residence permit, but after five years have passed, a temporary permit may be granted which can form the basis for a permanent residence permit. After three years with such a permit, a permanent residence permit shall be granted, provided that the conditions for the permit are still fulfilled and the conditions for permanent residence are otherwise met.

Ukrainians are the largest refugee group in Norway. According to the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI, 2026b), approximately 103,000 people have applied for collective protection since February 2022. 100,700 people have so far been granted collective protection, and approximately 84,900 people currently hold valid collective protection. Most arrivals are women (42%), 27% are men, and the remainder are children (UDI, 2025a).

All refugees aged 18–55 who have been granted temporary collective protection and are settled in a municipality under an agreement with IMDi (the Directorate of Integration and Diversity) may participate in the (voluntary) Introduction Programme. The introduction programme prepares the participants for work participation or education in Norway. Participants of the programme receive economic support (an introduction allowance). Ukrainian refugees who choose not to participate in the introduction programme or who are older than 55 years old are eligible to receive social support if they cannot support themselves financially (Tyldum, et al., 2023).

By the end of June 2025, a total of 58% of refugees from Ukraine who had completed the introduction programme were employed (Kvalø, 2025a). This represents an increase of 4 percentage points compared to the population that had completed the programme by the end of September 2024, measured in December 2024 (Kvalø, 2025a).

Refugees from Ukraine are to a greater extent employed in the country's least central municipalities (Kvalø, 2025a). The majority of Ukrainian refugees work in sale and service sector, and the second largest occupational group relates to cleaning and assistant work (Olsen, 2026). According to Kvalø (2025b), it takes Ukrainian women on average one month longer than Ukrainian men to secure their first job after completing the introduction programme.

4.2. General description of the municipality/region

Our case study was conducted in the two municipalities, Lillehammer and Ringebu, both located in Innlandet county. Innlandet is part of Eastern Norway and is the only county

without a coastline. Innlandet is the largest county in Norway by area, covering nearly one-fifth of the country's mainland. There are 46 municipalities and a population of 378,700 people. The municipalities of Lillehammer and Ringebru had populations of 29,500 and 4,460 inhabitants, respectively in 2025 (Innlandsstatistikk, 2025).

In Innlandet, forests occupy roughly half of the county's area, and open terrain covers 25%. Nearly two percent of the land is classified as built-up areas⁵. About 40% of jobs in Innlandet are in the public sector, mainly in municipalities. In the private sector, wholesale and retail trade and the hotel and restaurant industry are the largest, employing 16%.

Innlandet county had received approximately 6,780 Ukrainian refugees in 2025. The table shows the number of settled refugees with temporary collective protection in the period 2022–2024 in Norway, Innlandet, Lillehammer, and Ringebru.

⁵ Areal- og naturregnskap for Innlandet: Available at <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/eac50de0b4f441078afceaa58085660b>

Table 1. The number of settled refugees from Ukraine with temporary collective protection during the period 2022 to 2025 in Norway, Innlandet County, Lillehammer and Ringebu*

Year	Ukrainian refugees settled in Norway	Ukrainian refugees settled in Innlandet County	Ukrainian refugees settled in Lillehammer municipality	Ukrainian refugees settled in Ringebu municipality
2022	27,058	2,174	105	40
2023	29,730	2,675	155	-
2024	22,284	2,115	126	52
2025	10,921	1,003	51	-

* The value may have been removed for some municipalities for anonymization purposes.

IMDi (2024)

In 2024, there were 386 Ukrainians settled in Lillehammer municipality, accounting for 1.3% of the local population. *The evidence base for the qualification plan for immigrants* (Innlandet fylkeskommune, 2024) argues that immigration is essential for maintaining population size and a sustainable age structure, particularly in rural municipalities. The plan states that Innlandet has the oldest population in Norway, and the relatively young immigrant population is therefore crucial for meeting future labour needs and securing demographic sustainability.

4.3. Methodology

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with refugee women and through semi-structured expert interviews with actors working with refugee settlement and integration.

In total, eight interviews were conducted with refugee women who live in Lillehammer and Ringebu. Two of the interviews were conducted with a single interview participant. The remaining informants were interviewed in pairs- two interviews involved two friends, and one interview involved two sisters. Informants were between 30 and 55 years old, and they were at different stages of life. Informants varied in terms of their marital status and whether they had children or not. Given that the informants had different backgrounds provided us with nuanced experiences of how refugee women experience work integration in Norway.

Expert interviews were also conducted with three advisors from Lillehammer Læringscenter⁶ (Lillehammer Learning Center). One of the advisors was of Ukrainian origin. Additionally, we collected relevant statistical data through the Inland County Municipality.

The women were recruited through staff at Lillehammer and Ringebu Learning Centres. A few interested women could not participate due to language barriers, as they did not speak English or Norwegian sufficiently well. Those who participated in the interviews had already acquired enough Norwegian to communicate with the researchers. One of the informants, who had an intermediate level of Norwegian, also used English during the interview to explain herself.

All the informants were provided with an informed consent form before the interview. For the Ukrainian participants, an informed consent form was available in Norwegian, English

⁶ Lillehammer Learning Centre administers the Introduction Programme and coordinates the settlement of refugees in the municipality, provides Norwegian language and social studies training, as well as primary education for adult immigrants.

and Ukrainian. The Norwegian case study was approved by SIKT (Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research) regarding the processing of personal data according to ethical rules and regulations.

4.4. Results

Based on the interviews conducted with refugee women and integration actors, three main structural barriers for work integration were identified. These are language requirements, limited employment market in Lillehammer and around, and the bureaucracy around the recognition of Ukrainian education in Norway.

4.4.1. Language

Language skills play an important role in the Norwegian job market, as the workplace language is often Norwegian. Refugees are required to have a certain level of Norwegian language skills to participate in the work market. Language is important when it comes to being able to function in many different types of jobs.

One of our informants, who has higher education related to economics, and who has been working in the taxation system in Ukraine, mentioned that language is one of the main reasons that she cannot work in the same field in Norway. Another informant, who has higher education from Ukraine, mentioned that language is the main barrier preventing her from getting a job that is relevant to her education in urban planning.

The Ukrainian women we spoke to had different levels of knowledge of the Norwegian language. While some of them were fluent, others were intermediate. Two of our informants argued that the duration of the language course, which is one year long, was too short for learning a new language.

Another informant who has a trainee position within the health sector said that she improved her language skills through her work:

Different dialects spoken by patients, relatives, colleagues...I thank my colleagues who are very patient with me because I ask a lot of questions at work, for example, about grammar (participant in an individual interview).

Our study has identified a set of enablers for language training. Some of the volunteering organizations offer low-threshold language cafes, and organizations like Frelsesarmeen (The Salvation Army) provide language courses. One of our informants noted that she did not have time to attend any of these courses because her children have different activities and she needs to take them to different places during the week. This illustrates how being alone with children in a new country and keeping work-life balance while keeping up with the requirements of the integration process, such as language training, can be experienced as difficult for some women.

Language can also be a hindrance for manual work, according to an expert we interviewed. She elaborated:

If you work in a production company, you need to know the language. They need to speak good Norwegian, because you have to be able to give a message, and you have to be able to receive it and pass it on. If a log goes off track, you have to shout 'watch out'...Language can be important for safety at the workplace (expert interview).

Being able to understand and speak Norwegian would also speed up the entire labour participation, according to an expert, as those who learn Norwegian faster, can be offered an internship shortly after they arrive in Norway. Needless to say, there are several other factors, such as age, educational background, and motivation, that come into play determining how fast a person can acquire new language.

As mentioned earlier, refugee integration in Norway puts an important emphasis on language skills. As one of our informants said, adults learn Norwegian when they participate in the Introduction Program, and children learn the language as they attend school or kindergarten. As demonstrated in an earlier comparative study on the labour market integration of immigrants in the Norwegian and Swedish rural and mountainous regions, language skills not only enable employment but also are a facilitator for

immigrants' access to information and a network that provides work opportunities (Hansson et al., 2023).

4.4.2. Limited job market in Lillehammer and around

Size and centrality of municipalities are among the factors that shape labour market integration of refugees. It is reported that issues such as poor alignment between the refugees' skills and local labour market needs, large proximity between residence and workplace, combined with poorly developed public transport and limited available jobs locally are among the factors that can create a barrier for labour market integration of refugees (Hernes et al., 2024).

In the Norwegian labour market, personal networks and references are often decisive, sometimes more than formal qualifications. One of the experts elaborated:

For some, it can be difficult to accept that you may have an excellent CV and top academic results, but if you do not know anyone in Lillehammer, you are unlikely to get a job. Nevertheless, this is often the case: personal contacts and references—people who can vouch for who you are - are crucial (expert interview).

Having a local network as a foreign person can be hard. In that sense, one can suggest that Ukrainian refugees, along with other refugees from other countries of origins stand in a disadvantaged position in the Norwegian labour market.

According to one of our informants at the learning centre, several of the Ukrainian women have high-level professional experience in their home country, such as managing multiple hotels, but are now employed in low-skilled positions at the local laundry, or in the kitchen at the local nursing home for the elderly.

The informant also pointed out that there are examples of women who have accepted lower-status weekend cleaning jobs in the tourism sector, acquired work experience, and subsequently moved into other positions, improving their economic situation within a relatively short period. This underscores both the importance attached to all types of work

in Norway and the potential for upward mobility when individuals are willing to start in less qualified jobs.

One of the informants explained that she initially accepted a cleaning job because she understood that she had to “start from something”. After several temporary positions, she was offered a job at the local school, despite having no prior experience working with children. She now reports enjoying the work very much:

I enjoy it a lot. Before, I thought, “No, I can’t work with children.” But now I find it really fun. The children teach me a lot of Norwegian, and the local dialect (participant in a group interview).

Some of the Ukrainians find part-time work on their own (for example, in restaurants, delivery services, or seasonal jobs at ski resorts), while others obtain employment through the centre’s networks and contacts. However, Lillehammer is a university city, and a key challenge is that university students occupy most of the available part-time positions in the region.

However, it is important to highlight that the Ukrainian women we interviewed were mostly satisfied with the region where they are resettled. Despite the limited job opportunities, none of them expressed a strong desire to move to bigger cities with higher centrality.

On the other hand, some of the informants have learned to appreciate living in a smaller place:

I would like to continue working at the kindergarten. I am very happy there, I like working with children, and I have good colleagues. Life here is calm. We considered moving to a big city, but I no longer want that. I have family in Oslo, but after two or three days in a big city I just want to go home—to a quiet place. I like living here (participant in a group interview).

Another informant highlighted the advantages of living in a smaller place.

I rent an apartment and pay for electricity and many other expenses, such as food and clothing. It is easier to live here because we spend less money on these things. For example, I live close to my workplace, so I do not need to take the

bus or travel far, which also allows me to save time (participant in a group interview).

4.4.3. Recognition of qualifications

The number of applications for recognition of foreign education is increasing in Norway. One in three applications came from Ukrainian applicants in 2024, and 8 out of 10 applications were approved according to the Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills (Fredriksen, 2025).

The Ukrainian women we spoke to have various backgrounds with respect to their education and occupation in Ukraine. They used to have different positions in Ukraine, such as, taxation officer, sales manager, bank employee, social worker, and so forth. In Norway, they had work or trainee positions in areas where they were mostly over-qualified, such as in the service sector or manual work. Although many Ukrainians get their education recognized in Norway (Fredriksen, 2025), those who have a background within the health sector, such as doctors and nurses, can encounter difficulties, and in many cases, they are required to take up extra courses in Norway.

One of our informants had a degree in psychology, which they could not get recognized in Norway. Our informants also mentioned that they know Ukrainians who are educated nurses but cannot work as nurses in Norway due to the same issue.

When it comes to bureaucracy around the recognition of education in Norway, our informants described it as a lengthy process. Some of them had not even applied for recognition, anticipating that it would take a long time. Another issue our informants mentioned was that it can be difficult to get access to the necessary documents for recognition of education from Ukraine because some institutions are closed, and the others experienced difficulties with lack of staff, digital infrastructure and postal issues, due to the ongoing war.

As mentioned earlier, for the recognition of some educational degrees, the foreign applicants are required to take additional courses in Norway. One of our informants, who used to work as a bank employee in Ukraine reflected on her situation:

I would like to continue to work in the bank sector, but I know that it is impossible now because of my level of Norwegian language. I would like to work with accounting, but then I need to study again in Norway, and I have to pay for that education. It means that I need to work and save money for that (participant in a group interview).

One of the participants in our research was not sure whether or not they would stay in Norway in the future. For that informant, investing in education or applying to get her education recognized was not an option. In this sense, it is important to note that many Ukrainian women have family members, often husbands and brothers, back in Ukraine, which makes it difficult for them to make permanent plans in Norway.

4.4.4. Trauma/stress

There are also individual factors that can lead to barriers to integration. Different levels of trauma and stress in relation to immigrating from a war-zone and leaving a country and family members behind, can amount to considerable difficulties for refugees. A recent report from Norway shows that mental health issues and traumas, along with other factors, constitute barriers to integration of Ukrainian refugees in the labour market (Hernes et al., 2024). On a scale from 1 to 5, mental health issues and traumas score 2,7 as an individual barrier to integration of refugees in the labour market (Hernes et al., 2024).

One informant, who came to Norway alone as a refugee, elaborated on what it feels like to be a refugee and reflected on how it might have an impact on learning a new language:

There is a lot of stress for all the Ukrainians because there is war in Ukraine, and all the Ukrainians have family members there. All of us have health problems. The health system in Norway and Ukraine is different. I would like to travel to Ukraine to my osteopath, to my dentist, to my therapist, but I can't travel to Ukraine. This is an extra burden, extra stress. I have good colleagues here where

I work in Lillehammer. They are kind. But I don't understand when they talk among themselves. I listen to them all day long, and I get very tired in my head. When I come home after work, I do not want to hear more Norwegian. (participant in individual interview).

Trauma and stress were mentioned by some of the experts we talked to:

There is a lot of stress and trauma. We notice distress among all. They have experienced air raid alarms, so that's basically the underlying reason why learning might happen a little later for some, because they have so many other thoughts (expert interview).

Mental health appears to be an important factor that influences the entire integration period, as it has an impact on learning the language. For Ukrainian women with small children, the differences between the kindergarten regulations in Norway and Ukraine can lead to additional difficulties. One of the experts we interviewed said:

In Ukraine, they do not necessarily take children to kindergarten before they are three years old. For some women, it is a great sorrow to send a one-year-old to kindergarten. This is a really big stress factor for some of the mothers who did not know about that before they arrived in Norway (expert interview).

4.4.5. Important factors to strengthen work integration

The local learning centres have developed close cooperation with local employers and, over several years, built up an extensive network through a dedicated placement coordinator, states an expert at the learning centre. Schools and kindergartens are seen as particularly good arenas for practising Norwegian, as are workplaces such as warehouses where employees have many opportunities to speak and use the language. The expert explains that the purpose of the work placements is also to obtain feedback on how they function in a workplace. Supervisors assess whether the candidate shows initiative, participates actively, and fits into the social environment. Such feedback strengthens the candidate's chances in the next job process and provides valuable references.

A few informants emphasised that their work placements were important for obtaining employment. One informant was given a placement in a kindergarten, even though she had no relevant experience from that field and later secured a permanent position. Another informant obtained a relevant placement in accounting/finance and was subsequently offered a permanent job at the same workplace. This was therefore a role that matched her previous experience.

One of the experts noted that although many Ukrainians arrive with higher-education diplomas, their career paths in Ukraine do not always align with their formal qualifications. For example, individuals with a master's degree may have worked in culture, office administration, childcare, or personal services. Those with administrative backgrounds are often the most difficult to place in employment that matches their education. The expert therefore emphasized that a core task for the learning centre is to conduct thorough assessments of both education and all types of work experience, including informal or short-term jobs, as these represents relevant competencies in the Norwegian labour market. As part of this mapping process, informal skills – such as handicraft skills - are also taken into account. The informant at the learning centre further noted that leisure activities in Norway are typically highly organized and that most people participate in some form of organization or association. Organized activities, as well as simple low-threshold opportunities, are important arenas for meeting others and building social networks. Staff at the learning centre, therefore, actively encourage participants to take part in such activities.

Our data also shows that the ability to adapt is quite crucial for labour market integration. As one expert explained, some participants acknowledge that their original qualifications are unlikely to be directly transferable to the Norwegian context:

Yes, I have an IT background, but I see that it will be difficult to get a job in Norway because of security issues. So I just have to start somewhere, and then we will see where it leads (expert interview).

When two of the informants were asked whether they would prefer jobs similar to those they held in Ukraine, one woman explained that she had understood upon arriving in Norway that she would not be able to obtain the same type of position. She emphasised that she was comfortable with this, highlighting lifelong learning and the opportunity to try something new:

For me, for example, when I came to Norway, I understood that I would not get the same job as I had in Ukraine. But I think it's nice. You have to keep learning throughout your life, and it's interesting to try something new. Why not? New experience, a new place, and a new location. It has actually allowed me to start my life over again (participant in a group interview).

The Norwegian case study highlights several challenges similar to those identified in the Icelandic and Swedish cases, including language barriers, occupational mismatch and the importance of local support structures. At the same time, the institutional context and labour market pathways differ in several important respects. The next chapter therefore compares the findings from the three case studies and discusses their implications for labour market integration in Nordic regions.

5. Conclusion

The case studies from Iceland, Sweden and Norway illustrate both the opportunities and challenges that Ukrainian refugee women face when entering labour markets in remote Nordic regions. Although the experiences of Ukrainian refugee women were similar across the three Nordic regions, the mechanisms supporting labour market entry differed. In Sweden, civil society actors and individual initiatives played a central role. In Norway, institutional programmes such as the introduction programme were more prominent. In Iceland, labour market entry occurred relatively quickly but was often limited to low-skilled sectors.

The results of this study indicate that Ukrainian women demonstrate a strong work ethic, adaptability, and pragmatism when it comes to entering the Nordic labour market, often accepting positions well below their skill level to secure income and integrate into local communities.

In the countries of study, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, these women generally entered the labour market quickly, but primarily into low skilled jobs, often in the service and health sectors, with significant underutilization of their qualifications. Of the women interviewed, 8 women in both Iceland and Norway, and 9 in Sweden, a minority was working in positions matching their education and previous experience. Whilst the sample of this research was small, interviews with experts working with refugees suggest that this is the situation more broadly.

None of the women interviewed in Akureyri, Iceland had jobs aligned with their qualifications, experts furthermore did not know of any Ukrainian women who had found a job matching their qualifications. One participant mentioned a Ukrainian woman who might have found a matching job, but the researchers could not confirm this through an interview. In Sweden, several women were employed in roles that partially overlapped with prior experience, such as administrative or logistics positions. However, only two worked in a job that matched their Ukrainian professional role. In Norway, a small number

of women obtained work placements and later permanent jobs in kindergartens, accounting/finance, or school support roles. One of the women got a job in accounting, that aligns with her education. Her bachelor's degree was recognised in Norway and a work placement at the accounting company led to this job. In all countries, qualification recognition barriers and language requirements impacted occupational mismatch. Although this differed across countries and specialties. For instance, in Sweden, Ukrainian doctors and nurses were offered opportunities to work within the health sector, such as hospitals and were offered training.

What the interviews highlighted, particularly in Sweden, was the adaptability of the respondents, taking jobs that could be perceived as dead-ends, and treating them as stepping stones thereby highlighting the pragmatism involved. Accepting a job not necessarily meeting the criteria of a previous career was necessary to gain an income but also gain the necessary insights of the local job market while also improving their language skills.

5.1. Main obstacles

The main obstacles identified among the subjects of this research were the following: language, recognition of professional qualifications, and lack of network.

Language proficiency was by far the most significant barrier in all three countries, though the effect differed by context. It appeared that language mastery was necessary for work aligned with qualifications and contributed as a determinant of long-term mobility and social integration. In some cases, women felt they could not consider using their previous profession until they achieved much stronger language skills. The access to language learning was different across countries. Iceland appears to have the most flexible labour market in terms of entering with no knowledge of the Icelandic language, however knowledge of English can often be a prerequisite to entering the Icelandic labour market instead. This may lead to less motivation to learn Icelandic. In Sweden, on the other hand, participants felt that knowledge of English rarely translated into job opportunities. To get

employment or even to be considered for employment, Swedish was required. In Iceland it appeared that knowing English did help initially with finding work, but as with the other countries, mastering the local language is important to find a job matching previous qualifications.

With regards to recognition of professional qualifications, as well as previous work experience, it appears to be complex across all countries to get full recognition (although this differs by profession and need). This seems particularly challenging for regulated professions (e.g., psychologists, dentists, healthcare workers), and professions requiring local certification (e.g., teachers, accountants).

A lack of a local professional network also hinders successful labour market integration. In all the countries of research, and in particular in the remote regions examined, employers often hired based on recommendations or familiarity. What complicates matters even more is that the job market is more limited in remote regions which also affects networking opportunities. The women interviewed were highly pragmatic and understood the importance of having local people to provide job recommendations following their first job in the local labour market. They also tended to rely on other Ukrainians, civil society actors, local learning centres and other connections (when available).

Despite the obstacles, many women expressed high satisfaction with safety, community, and quality of life, and many planned to stay long-term, though legal uncertainty about the duration of protection created stress.

5.2. Key enablers

Key enablers identified among the subjects of this research in all countries were the following: language training, structured work placements/internships, civil society actors (especially in Sweden where they stepped in as Ukrainian refugees did not qualify for Swedish for Immigrants run by the municipalities), municipal/state integration programmes (especially in Iceland and Norway), access to further education and reskilling,

supportive employers and local networks, high motivation and adaptability of Ukrainian women, and finally childcare infrastructure and gender equal labour markets.

These enablers varied across countries. In Sweden, for instance, civil society actors played a crucial role in facilitating the process of entering the labour market. All nine respondents there mentioned the assistance they received from civil society actors who acted as a crucial bridge when state institutions were absent or slow.

Work placements, internships, and subsidised employment provided structured pathways into work which helped the women overcome lack of networks, language barriers, and employers' hesitation. These varied a lot across countries, for instance in Iceland the Directorate of Labour provides some 6-month subsidised placements, often in schools or kindergartens. Whilst in Norway, learning centres match women with employers and supervise progress, and work placements frequently lead to permanent offers (schools, healthcare, accounting). Finally in Sweden, civil society projects create direct contact with employers.

In Iceland and Norway, municipal and state support systems appeared more visible than in Sweden. Examples of this were arrival support from Akureyri municipality (housing, school placement, initial guidance), and close cooperation between the municipality, SÍMEY, the Directorate of Labour, and Red Cross. In Norway a similar Introduction Programme positively impacted labour market integration. Access to further education additionally gave women a long-term path beyond low-skilled work.

5.3. Examples of good practices

As well as identifying obstacles and enablers to successful labour market integration, the project aimed to gather examples of good practice in labour market integration. Many of the enablers above can also be viewed as examples of good practice in labour market integration, but in addition to those, the following examples were identified: Skólasmiðja and university courses in English at the University of Akureyri; ESF-Funded

Folkuniversitetet Project for Ukrainians in Sweden; and work placements via learning centres in Norway.

Skólasmiðja in Iceland is a targeted programme with internship components, where people are trained for work in kindergartens and schools to ensure a smoother integration. The women interviewed who had gone through this programme were very positive about it. There were also women in Iceland who had been able to pursue further education at the University of Akureyri taking degrees taught in English. These programmes are internationally recognised and help build local networks and improve long-term labour prospects in Iceland and elsewhere.

The ESF-funded Folkuniversitetet Project for Ukrainians in Sweden is tailored directly to Ukrainian jobseekers, helps verify educational certificates, offers Swedish classes and job matching, and organises events where refugees meet employers.

Work Placements via Learning Centres (Lillehammer Læringscenter) in Norway offer structured placements in kindergartens, care homes, warehouses, accounting offices. This includes close collaboration with local employers, and there appears to be a high rate of transition to permanent jobs.

This project also aimed to identify gender-sensitive and targeted integration measures to enhance the labour opportunities for Ukrainian women in remote areas. In the Nordic labour markets, there are strong gender equality policies, for instance a decent supply of childcare options, such as kindergartens, and a high labour force participation rate among women. Although not highlighted as much in the individual case chapters, the Nordic labour markets benefit from highly available childcare (kindergartens), high female labour-force participation norm, and institutional structures that support work–life balance. These create a favourable environment for refugee women to seek work—though practical barriers (stress, unfamiliar childcare norms) still exist.

5.4. Policy suggestions

Based on the findings of the project, certain policies could be made to enhance the labour opportunities for this group. This includes strengthening sector-specific training pathways for women. The Ukrainian women require local language proficiency and credentials for entry into their sector of choices. Municipalities could benefit from structured internship programmes that allow refugee women to gain work experience in fields related to their qualifications. In Iceland, sector-targeted programmes like Skólasmiðja could furthermore be expanded to other fields (e.g., healthcare support, hospitality management, office administration). It would also be an option to pair sector programmes with fast-track certification support for women with related education (e.g., psychologists, teachers, HR professionals).

As language learning is so important for integration, one suggestion would be to provide integrated language and work models tailored to women's needs. Women who are single mothers can particularly struggle with combining language classes with work and childcare. This could be achieved by combining part-time work placements with structured language learning (as in Norway's learning centres), by offering women-tailored language schedules, e.g. daytime courses that align with kindergarten hours, or evening or hybrid options for working mothers. Or by providing language support in the workplace (simplified instructions, bilingual orientation materials). It is also necessary to offer advanced language levels, not just beginner/intermediate, to prevent stagnation (a problem raised in Iceland and Norway interviews).

Additionally, there is a need to improve recognition of qualifications in general. Furthermore, it is possible to enhance social network-building for women in remote areas. Another option could be to strengthen mentorship programmes pairing Ukrainian women with local women in the same field. Finally, labour market integration could be enhanced by stabilising employment pathways beyond short contracts. Temporary subsidies (e.g., Iceland's 6-month placements) help entry but can trap women in cycles of unstable employment.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of recognising the specific challenges faced by refugee women in remote labour markets. While Ukrainian refugee women often demonstrate strong motivation to work and integrate, structural barriers such as language requirements, limited recognition of qualifications and lack of local networks can hinder their progress. At the same time, the case studies show that targeted initiatives — such as internships, language training combined with work experience, and support from civil society actors — can significantly facilitate labour market entry. These experiences provide useful lessons for Nordic regions seeking to improve labour market integration for refugee women and to make better use of their skills and qualifications.

As Nordic regions continue to receive refugees and face demographic and labour shortages, improving access to meaningful employment for refugee women will remain an important policy priority.

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